

Roll Call, September 19, 2007

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) was a staffer with the International Relations Committee when he and his boss, then-Chairman Ben Gilman (R-N.Y.), were waiting one day to discuss Okinawa military base reauthorization with Japanese government officials. Gilman, a decorated military pilot during World War II, had flown 35 missions over Japan during the war.

“The Japanese came in and asked, ‘Have you ever been to Japan as chairman?’” Kirk recalled. “He said, ‘I haven’t.’ Later, when they walked out for a minute, he told me, ‘I didn’t want to tell them that the last time I was in Japan I was rearranging the furniture.’”

Gilman, who retired from the House in 2003 after 30 years, was 11 when he and his father traveled to Germany to visit an aunt in Berlin. He saw there the signs of increased military presence that preceded WWII — a war that would claim the life of his aunt, a victim of the Holocaust — and a war that would see Gilman earn the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal, with Oak Leaf Clusters. Gilman said that boyhood visit sparked his interest in international affairs.

That interest was readily apparent when Gilman was elected to the House of Representatives in 1972, after six years in New York’s state Assembly.

“When I first entered the House, and they were asking us which committee assignments we would prefer, I picked [the] International Relations [now Foreign Affairs] Committee,” Gilman said.

And the interest continues today as Gilman and others took part in a groundbreaking last month for a new international studies center bearing Gilman’s name. The Gilman Center for International Studies is at the State University of New York campus in Orange, located in the former Congressman’s old district.

According to the SUNY-Orange Web site, much of the space for the new Gilman Center will be carved from the college’s library. The center will house SUNY-Orange’s expanding global

studies program, which allows students at the school to earn an associate of arts degree in international studies. According to a press release issued by the college, display cases throughout the interior of the center will “showcase research papers, artwork, memorabilia and other items from Gilman’s more than 30 years in Washington, as well as his travel abroad.”

An international lecture series also will be associated with the center.

While in Congress, Gilman established an ongoing foreign exchange program between the U.S. and South Korea, whereby South Korean students come to work with the State Department and American students travel to South Korea to work with that country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program helps students of limited financial means pursue academic studies abroad.

Gilman — whom Kirk describes as having once “converted” a group of foreign aid opponents in Congress to internationalism in order to pass a key foreign assistance bill — is adamant that the United States has neglected its traditional emphasis on public diplomacy to its own detriment.

“I don’t think we do enough in public diplomacy,” he said in a telephone interview. “We have lacked focus ever since we disbanded the U.S. Information Agency. ... We should be doing more to promote democracy in Latin America; in Asia there are also a lot more opportunities.”

Kirk said the international studies center “will complete Gilman’s legacy. He is well-loved in his district as well as in Washington for his commitment to America’s role” in the world.

House Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.) expressed similar sentiments about the center, saying that international studies students at the college “could have no greater inspiration than Ben Gilman, who served on the International Relations Committee for 30 years.”

Rangel, whose election to Congress preceded Gilman’s by two years, said he “never met anyone more honest or sincere than Ben Gilman, Democrat or Republican,” adding that he and Gilman “achieved a sense of bipartisanship” that could serve as an example to others in

Congress.

Gilman currently resides in Middletown, N.Y.